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Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore "Model"

Foreign Statesmen and Their Statecraft

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Course I, Foundations of National Security Strategy
Seminar "D"
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I. Introduction.

National Security Strategy Design Overview. Singapore's Senior Minister and elder statesman emerged on the international scene in 1965 following Singapore's split and subsequent *defacto* independence from Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew crafted a grand strategy that resulted in Singapore's development as a great city-state. More than a "bank with a flag,"¹ Singapore's economy grew in just a few years to rival the colonial power to which it was once subservient.

The continued implosion of the British Empire and diminution of U.S. prestige in the post-Vietnam period provided Singapore with added impetus to exploit the power vacuum in the Pacific rim. Toward this end, Lee Kuan Yew formulated a cogent and prescient strategy for the nascent nation of Singapore. He was the true visionary who used independence from Malaysia as the catalytic event that launched a previously unimportant nation successfully onto the world scene.

Early success vaulted Lee into international prominence and prompted strategic analyses of Singapore's central theme that was essentially to first gain, then project, economic power. The goal for a strong economy was complemented by a commitment to nation, the region, and the international community. Lee has risen in recent years to become a global statesman and his formula for successful National Security Strategy and penchant for economic brinksmanship have made him a popular, if not controversial, international figure. Lee's innovations are largely responsible for his nation's early development and emergence as one of the most significant transnational economies.

Lee's innovations melded both realism and idealism into a uniquely crafted transnational strategy that allowed him to maneuver his nation through dynamic regional balance of power changes without the shackles of "paradigm prejudice." Lee's success is the product of specific conditions and carefully envisioned approaches to resolve problems that immediately threatened Singapore's survival. Lee's manipulations vis-a-vis education, conflation of the races, religion, and culture without

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dampening the spirits of the disparate ethnic groups hastened the development of a highly productive hybrid population. That he successfully negotiated these challenges was largely to his singular credit and was an early indicator of his genius.

The early challenges to Singapore's success included balance of power shifts in the East Asia region, potential Malaysian retaliation, the Vietnam War, and the British departure from Singapore's bases. Episodically and in combination, these phenomena threatened the new city-state and each required novel approaches to diffuse and ultimately turn into advantages. In Singapore's new capacity as a sovereign, Lee clearly recognized dangerously precarious potentialities poised to adversely affect Singapore's survival and development.

Assumptions About the Nation and the World Singapore is constrained geographically, demographically, and politically. Soon after independence, Lee advocated "resuming friendly trading relations with Indonesia, despite the state of political confrontation" ² Despite poor terrain and a disparate multicultural population, this overture to a government to which he was only recently estranged, served as a harbinger of Lee's pragmatic strategy and methodology for innovation. Lee understood from the outset that independence did not equal autonomy nor preclude interdependent relationships. Hence, Singapore remained engaged while simultaneously cultivating a "sense of separate nationhood with such success that within a few years most Singaporeans accepted their independent status as inevitable" ³

To further the process of nationhood along, Lee established clear goals to exploit the few advantages his nation enjoyed. Singapore is confined on the land. Conversely, its littoral region includes a natural harbor strategically postured at the terminus of vital shipping lanes linked with burgeoning regional economies and international mercantile giants as well. Lee was also keenly aware that shortcomings in indigenous resources could be more than compensated for because of the tremendous economic advantages afforded by the Singapore harbor. It was already one of the best in the region and soon improved to become one of the great transshipping, refining, and manufacturing centers in the world.

Demography Lee was not intimidated by challenges inherent in tremendous disparities resident in Singapore's vastly diverse ethnic population. Yet, he realized that unless the nation took on some characteristics of homogeneity that growth would be inhibited. Instead of the total eradication of culture, Lee chose to exploit ethnicity as an opportunity. Fortunately for Singapore, by the time of independence, "the importance of distinctive minority groups was already in decline"⁴ By 1970, the Jewish, Armenian, Arab, Indian, Pakistani, and Ceylonese populations had diminished to manageable levels. However, the Chinese and Malaysians still wielded significant influence. The Chinese asserted their schools, culture, and, in particular, their native tongue in a bid to become the national language. Lee viewed this as a detriment to the assimilation of other minorities and thus a potential threat to the nation. Using Israel as a model, he observed that total assimilation demands "threatened to produce a muddled, rootless culture"⁵ Instead, and as a compromise, Lee oriented on a common language -- English -- while still stressing the richness of ethnic diversity. Singapore would develop its own cultural and national identity through language, education, ingenuity, and hard work.

Education was key to Lee's vision for developing human capital for a successful Singapore. He was clearly aware of the nation's abilities to compete against more powerful countries, but felt confident that a highly educated work force would allow Singapore to excel in the marketplace. Because English was the accepted language in international business circles, Lee felt it important for as many Singaporeans as possible to be fluent in English. To better immerse the populace in English-based education, the best and the brightest were sent abroad to study in the finest institutions in the region and in the West. Culture was preserved by allowing other languages to be spoken, but not officially encouraged or sanctioned.

Women were also made full partners and encouraged to participate equally with the men. Through the introduction of family planning initiatives, they were relieved of their traditional role as bearers of large families and introduced to the labor force, higher education, and politics as well. This was viewed as revolutionary, and it allowed women the opportunity to more fully participate within a well defined meritocracy. Singaporean women, though initially active politically in order to gain equal status, have recently retreated "leaving the political arena as an exclusively masculine concern"⁶

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Survival Political, Economic, and Military Dynamics Singapore's incipient problems were political, economic, and military in nature. However, among these sources of potential crises, the future of the economy was the most vital and immediate.⁷ At first, Lee was concerned over the departure of the British. But Singaporean concerns were fortunately overstated and short lived as a tremendous period of prosperity followed. Expanding markets and rapid industrialization were actually accelerated by Britain's relinquishment of vast tracts of superior real estate and infrastructure. Economic good fortune cemented even further the idea of independence among Singaporeans and radically increased the public's confidence in Lee's ability to lead. "Singapore was still heavily dependent in 1965 on entrepot trade,"⁸ but now enjoyed greater balance because of increased commerce generated by demands of the post-Suez Canal period, the Vietnam War, and the 1967 Arab Israeli War.

Discovery that perceived dependence on Britain would not result in serious economic or military trauma created conditions enabling Singapore to experience historically unprecedented growth. However, even in light of economic success, Lee's political faith in alliances was shaken both by Britain's departure and the lack of apparent U.S. resolve in its decision to abandon Vietnam.

The National Interests and Threats to Them Singapore's national interests were simply to survive as a sovereign state and prosper economically. Once survival was assured, Lee determined for Singapore to emerge as the shining star economy of the region. The method to accomplish this goal was to improve the already robust market-based economy largely through continued *entrepot* trade. As success broadened its opportunity base, Singapore expanded enterprises in transshipping, petroleum refinery, manufacturing, and banking.

Threats to Singapore's early survival were as diverse as its ethnic groups. Its virtually indefensible terrain could be easily interdicted from the sea and from its contiguous border with Malaysia which considered Singapore to be an "economic parasite."⁹ Singapore was also politically threatened by its lack of supporting alliances and inability to defend itself with its meager armed forces. However, economically and ideologically, Singapore provided an irresistible attraction for foreign capital investment. This compensated for its inability to defend itself in the conventional sense and actually obviated the need for anything other than a nominal armed force.

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II. Ends, Ways, Means Analysis

Ends -- Foreign Policy Objectives. Lee's principal objectives were to guarantee Singapore's survival even as the nation was born. Singapore, insignificant militarily, achieved strength and prestige through a thriving economy, suasive diplomacy, and by cultivating an ideology based on a strong national ethos. Lee succeeded in all these areas virtually from the outset and "the early years of independence were a time of international prosperity when Singapore's economy grew quickly" ¹⁰ Additionally, he established definitive and achievable goals for Singapore that included plans to establish the world's largest harbor, oil refineries, manufacturing, and banking. New initiatives were devised to complement Singapore's already commanding prowess as an entrepot leader.

To bring attention to early successes and to safeguard the future, Lee traveled internationally to publicize his success and to wrest concessions. He negotiated directly with governments, particularly Britain, and made shrewd public appeals through the newly powerful television medium. His exploitation of the media was an example of his propensity to win advantages and to turn "adversities into opportunities" ¹¹ As a result, Lee was emerging on the international scene as a world statesman.

Success abroad further enhanced Lee's stature at home where he was able to coopt the National Trades Union Congress in a 1967 labor crisis. He appealed to the Singapore Employees' Federation to work as a coalition to "build up the prosperity of the state, of employees and workers alike" ¹² Teamwork was also a key growth tenet that helped Singapore's ten-year economic plan to surpass its objectives in just five years. By 1970, Singapore's per capita gross national product was higher "than its erstwhile colonizer, Britain" ¹³

Ways (Strategy) -- Plans and Priorities Lee's strategy included fomenting a sense of nationalism through a common language, higher education, and the easing of ethnic and labor tensions. With these initiatives established, Lee was now confident to further intensify the "wooing of foreign and local investment" ¹⁴ This effort culminated ultimately in the establishment of 36 banks, 26 of which are foreign owned, and Singapore surpassed Beirut and Hong Cong in the international

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gold market. By 1972 the United States, behind only Malaysia, had become her second leading trading partner accounting for 46% of the foreign capital invested. Remarkably, Singapore had by 1975 achieved its stated goal by becoming the third largest port behind Rotterdam and New York. As an oil refining mega-center, Singapore experienced only mild repercussions during the seventy's worldwide oil crisis and recession. During this period, Singapore also became the world's third largest refining center after Houston and Rotterdam. The World Bank noted that Singapore was experiencing accelerated growth complemented by vastly increased private investment, a decline in unemployment, increased revenues, and a surplus of savings and external reserves.

While the economy grew exponentially, so did a population that alarmingly increased by 4.4% per year. To combat this potentially enormous threat to prosperity within a nation of limited resources and space, Lee instituted educational programs and invoked a policy to curtail unchecked population growth. Incentives to limit families to two children resulted eventually in a manageable population growth rate of only 1.3% by 1975. This concerted effort thus avoided the projected disastrous growth rate that would have doubled the population in the "world's" most densely populated country at 3,787 persons per square kilometer.¹⁵

Despite small population numbers, Lee decreed compulsory military service as part of his strategy to imbue the populace with a spirit of national service. With only a fraction of her wealth dedicated to an armed force, Singapore could now turn over the preponderance of inherited and superbly developed British infrastructure to commercial enterprise. Only a small portion was retained for military use. Lacking any great external military threat, Singapore's meager armed forces encouraged national service, fostered cohesion, but only marginally existed as a viable military force.

Means -- Power and Resources Singapore's attitude toward its paucity of resources helps account for its early survival and ingenious success. The only resources of intrinsic value included water, a great harbor geostrategically located near the Straits of Malacca, and a hard working, physically fit, polyglot society. Singapore's quantum leaps from basic survival to robustness during her post-independence period brought not only great wealth to this tiny country, but drew increasing attention from a curious outside world as a template for success.

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III. Lessons Learned.

Singapore achieved success peculiar to its own circumstances and, to that extent, is an anomaly. Additionally, "Singapore's remarkable rise had been purchased at price"¹⁶ Although Singaporean government clearly possesses some democratic ideals, it has been likened to a "soft authoritarian regime" which does not allow for extensive individual freedoms. Lee's derivative democracy does not exactly mirror the American style, his diminution of personal freedoms worked often for the greater good of the family, neighborhood, community, and nation. Although some Singaporeans have felt constrained, belittled, and victimized by authoritarianism, Lee defends selected restrictions of individual rights by citing that the good of the nation overall must prevail.

Unlike the United States or even Taiwan, Singapore tolerates little dissident behavior. In fact, Lee characterizes 'good government' as one that is devoid of opposition debate. On the scant occasion that critics dared to surface, Lee would often react radically by deporting them for alleged traitorous and insidious collusion with foreign elements. This type of harsh treatment and a general lack of due process resulted in a one-third protest vote against Lee's customary mandate for unchallenged leadership in the 1968 and 1970 elections. Obversely, Lee was vociferously critical of the U.S. and Australia because they allowed and encouraged 'loyal opposition' and were too relaxed in their approaches to protecting individual rights at the expense of all.

Lee's leadership style has also been analogous to a "guided democracy" with socialist tendencies. For example, stricter controls on the media are a part of what the *Singapore Herald* has called over disciplined regimentation. It must be conceded that Lee has in some sense made casualties of democracy and socialism by autocratically setting conditions to lure foreign investment. Singapore's stability and tax-free flag carrier status attracted and kept multinational corporations whose "foreign capital, expertise and technology were vital to achieve rapid economic growth."¹⁷

Even Lee himself has concluded that he would avoid foisting his brand of government on a society "where it may not work,"¹⁸ although his ideas for meritocracy, induced homogeneity, and self-reliance seem to have universal application. In the aggregate, it remains unclear whether the filial generation will have their predecessors' intensity and innate abilities to sustain growth and to

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continue to build on their recent successful past. In this regard, it is too soon to detect if Lee's ultimate vision will withstand the rigors of reality and tyranny of time.

IV. Conclusions

The struggle for survival of this multiethnic city-state continues to be tempered by its success to date in deterring the disturbers of peace. Despite Lee Kuan Lee's charismatic emergence as a brilliant statesman on the precipice of dynamic change, it may be too soon to tell whether Singapore hangs in the crux of delicate balance or has truly consolidated its position as a uniquely benign economic power devoid of hegemonic ambitions. One thing is certain, Lee is clearly a skilled master politician. His personal charm and deft directness in crafting effective policy were integral to the calculus that produced, in a period of just ten years, one of modern history's most sophisticated and successful sovereigns even if it "continues to grow painfully, unequally, and often unjustly" ¹⁹

Despite some criticism, it is generally recognized that Lee's imaginative and ingenious statesmanship has contributed to his prominence as the principal strategy architect, social engineer, and motivator behind Singapore's accelerated modernization as a mercantilistic nation-state ²⁰. His suasive prowess and ability to negotiate from a position of weakness also contributed to his status as a statesman. However, whether his efforts can be deemed a model for export is doubtful, given the nation's unique ambient conditions, not the least of which include the conflation of Confucianism with Western values and a skewed approach to the democratic process. Yet despite expressed doubts and criticism, Lee has been wont to offer "unsought advice and methods that could not necessarily be transplanted to other countries with more complex, if perhaps less stark problems" ²¹

In the future, Singapore must exercise care to disallow the moral erosion of societal underpinnings it has so painstakingly built. As the gerocracy relinquishes power, it remains to be seen whether those who follow will continue, as have their parents, to avert calamity and project Singapore prudently into the 21st century.

End Notes

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- 3 Ibid , p 298
- 4 Ibid , p 312
- 5 Minchin, James, No Man is an Island, 239-272, 291-317 (London Allen and Unwin, 1990), p 301
- 6 Ibid , p 303
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Turnbull, p 303
- 9 Ibid , p 328
- 10 Ibid , p 304
- 11 Ibid , p 306
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Zakaria, p 109
- 14 Turnbull, p 307
- 15 Ibid , p 311
- 16 Ibid , p 318
- 17 Ibid , p 326
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- 10 Zakaria, Fareed, "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew " Foreign Affairs, Vol 73, No 2 (March/April 1994), pp 109-126